Michael Rakowitz's project with "Jewish Voice" and "Jewish Power"

# What Was the 'William Banks Jail Saga'?

Plus, the Left's response to the Israeli-Palestinian crisis, and how adapting crypto grant that raised tens of thousands of dollars for Palestinians

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The thing about the digital method that comprises the William Banks jail saga is that it also tells a story. Had the Twitch platform the phone and videos were shot has cells and barred windows and chain-link fences and tables scattered into the yard, it would be a story about a prison. Instead it's a story about a man who was in Los Angeles County Jail in 2 and Instagram and TikTok accounts have to be four months of "incarceration"—look the part, dressed in navy blue and gray clothes, with the occasional sidebarred or orange t-shirt. More than that, the footage has a 2000s flip-phone grain and frames, shaky camera work that you do see in virtual videos and in detention facilities that make their way onto social media.

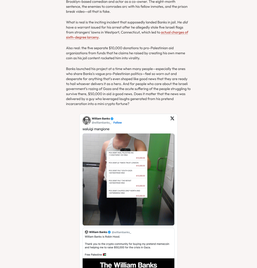
But William Banks did not spend all or even much of his time in an actual prison. He was in a virtual one, a Twitch channel he created to simulate the friends he made on the inside, documented his supposedly real time posts on his social media platforms. Gizmodo first reported on the fact that the jail saga was a "hoax" in late February, but "hoax" doesn't quite cut it.

Yes, he's lying online, and he began the gambit up during a 25-minute interview with me in early March after his supposed "release," in part of an unerring evidence, including interviews with other comedians who knew him socially and professionally, that he was not in jail. Banks's explanation for the project that "set Gaza Reality Show" (potentially a company that he filed for Brooklyn based comedian and actor as a co-owner. The eight month-long ruse involved fake mugshots on with his fellow inmates, and the prison break video—all that is false.

What is real is the exciting incident that supposedly landed Banks in jail. He did have a warrant issued for his arrest after he allegedly stole five bottles of gin from arrangers' lawns in Westport, Connecticut, which led to actual charges of petty larceny.

Also real: the five separate $10,000 donations to pro-Palestinian aid organizations from funds that he received from his crypto-based fundraising campaign, which can be just contract notwithstanding his crimes.

Banks launched his project at a time when many people—especially the ones who share Banks's vague pro-Palestinian politics—feel so worn out and desperate that they will turn to almost the good news that they can find, regardless of the source. Hamas's October 7 attack on Israel, and the Israeli government's razing of Gaza in response, have left many of the people struggling to survive there, $50,000 is not a good news. Does it matter that the funds were delivered to a guy who leveraged laughs generated from his pretend incarceration into a crypto fiasco?


William Banks @williambanks_
William Banks is Baden Hotel
There you to the crypto community for buying my pretend mariscaal and helping me to raise $50,000 for the crisis in Gaza
Free Palestine
The William Banks Jail Saga Foundation
Fake Jail Break
Fake Mugshots
Fake Jail Time
Fake Bail Money
Fake Jail Friends
Fake Jail Bitch
Fake Jail Wife
Fake Jail Kids
Fake Jail Life
Fake Jail Life
Fake Jail Life

"You're a hero man. Free Palestine"

"😂😂😂 this should be a reality tv show , getting the office vibes :jailhouse edition 😂😂"

"Hold on and don't let them break you. William. Your fans are supporting you and rooting for your swift release. 💔"

Joshua Waterman, who filmed the "pre-jail" interview with Banks at the comedian's home in October, told me that he was already a fan of Banks's work on Car World, and that when he reached out to talk to Banks, he wasn't in on the joke. But ultimately, he left the conversation not really caring whether Banks was telling "the truth," strictly speaking.

"He's presenting real things—you see the negative reaction to people speaking out on the horrors, the genocide that's happening in Palestine." Waterman said. "I guess I don't really care what's fictional and what's real, because if you treat it all as real, it kind of is, no matter whether it happened or not."

I asked Waterman about critiques about Banks's work, especially concerns like the ones Tamarez raised. "One criticism that I heard was just [Banks] making light of the situation in Gaza, which, if anyone still had that concern, I think it's obviously rectified by the real $50,000," he replied. As for the critiques of the jail hoax, he added, "I didn't focus on that element too much."

According to Lieutenant Eric Woods of the Westport Police Department, Banks is actually currently awaiting disposition with his larceny case, and that he expects that it will soon be off of the comedian's permanent record—at least, legally speaking. "I'm just talking from experience, but that typically means he's applied for a diversion program, meaning accelerated rehabilitation, which basically says if he doesn't get rearrested within 13 months, the cases get disposed of," Woods told me.

When we spoke on the phone in March, I was blunt with Banks: "William, I know you were not really in jail—"

"Yes I was," he interrupted.

"Are you ever going to tell people?"

He paused. "I...am just going to keep being myself, and...we're having a big party on March 14 at Mi Sabor Café, where I'll come back to New York, and my life will go back to normal a little bit after that."

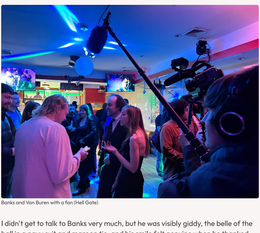
On the one hand, maybe a return to normalcy can't come soon enough. It already feels, to me, like the joke is curdling—Banks now has a "girlfriend" named Maddy Van Buren, who he claims to have met while "hitchhiking" and has revealed that Ant, his erstwhile cell mate, actually orchestrated the "jailbreak," a denouement (documented thoroughly on his social media accounts) that's less believable than the earlier stuff, and ultimately kind of exhausting to follow. At least some strangers online—ever the fickle audience—seem to agree with me.

But the people at Banks's welcome home party all seemed excited to be there—whether they'd showed up for the DJ sets from 454 and CoffeeBlack, to see the spectacle (as we waited around in front of the venue, a stranger asked my friend if Banks "is real"), or to support Banks. A couple hundred people trickled in throughout the night, many of them toting some kind of camera; a film crew scurried around the party, filming Banks as he greeted friends and admirers. When I asked the sound guy whether Banks had hired them, he told me no—the crew was filming for a YouTube channel. When I asked if it was one I would have heard of, he said, "No."

I also spotted Nicolas Heller, aka New York Nico, who described the jail saga to me as "cutting edge" entertainment. "I feel like it's a TV show, and I want to see what else is gonna happen," he told me.

There were continuous problems with the sound system. Nobody really knew where to stand. A few brave souls swayed and bobbed to the music coming from the turntables on top of an elevated stage, where Banks and a dozen or so of his friends danced in a makeshift VIP area, but the crowd got progressively denser the further away you went from the dance floor.

Waterman was there; so was McIndoe, and Banks's "girlfriend" Van Buren, who was glued to his side all night in a little black dress, waving from the stage and posing with him in photos. I spoke to multiple people who'd worked with Banks in some capacity, and they all praised him as a sweet, genuine guy, with more than one friend bringing up Andy Kaufman as a point of comedic comparison. "I feel like it played out like a dream, especially for somebody who met [Banks] and instantly believed in his crazy," Yates, Banks's Car World acolyte, said. "On Instagram, people kind of knew it was a bit, whereas on Twitter, people thought it was real. I felt vindicated, especially when he donated the money—the most beautiful part about it is at the end, it wasn't for nothing."


Banks and Van Buren with a fan (Nell Gate)

I didn't get to talk to Banks very much, but he was visibly giddy, the belle of the ball in a navy suit and maroon tie, and his smile felt genuine when he thanked me for coming to his party. He didn't talk to the crowd much, either—there was no long speech, no big reveal. His "cellmate" Ant was allegedly supposed to attend and cause a scene, but according to Banks's friends, he never actually came inside the venue. Banks led a "Free Palestine" chant that the partygoers didn't really join in on, which segued into one of the DJs playing "Crazy Frog," and then Banks did a little crowd work about believing in God that drew a few thin laughs. Once the crowd had been winnowed down to around 60 people at 1 a.m., Banks started performing some original raps. That signaled to me, at least, that it was time to go.

Elizabeth Clayton, a partygoer who knew Van Buren from the Internet, said she wanted to show up because she admired what Banks was doing, even though she still wasn't sure what, exactly, that was. "I was super interested to see how this panned out, because I haven't seen such a large scale hoax like this that hasn't been AI-related in a long time," she said, adding that because she wasn't familiar with the criminal justice system, "I did think it was real for longer than I should have."

For her, the unreality of Banks's content didn't sour her on it—instead, it was a huge part of the draw. "I want to be deluded in a way that isn't fucking AI slop, in a way that's fresh, because we're deluded in these predictable ways these days, it's never anything experimental," she told me. "Even if you detach all of this shit from what he's doing, he donated so much money to Palestine. He's doing good, and he's making people feel good and laugh, and that is rare as fuck these days, you know?"

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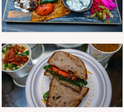
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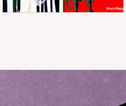
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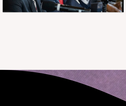
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